

A STAR WHO'S PART HUSTLER, PART GENIUS: [SPORTS FINAL Edition]

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[Melvin Van Peebles] was already gone from Hollywood. He wrote a couple of plays for Broadway and began busing black people into midtown, which shook things up quite a bit. Along the way, he adapted "The Sophisticated Gents" from a John Williams novel for a television miniseries. It foreshadowed "Hill Street Blues," "St. Elsewhere," "Homicide," "Law & Order," "The Practice," "ER" and every other show in which we cannot assume anything about a character because of his or her color, religion, class, accent or whatever else. He also became in the '80s the first black trader on Wall Street.

So the Van Peebles contribution has been both varied and exemplary of how complex one person's influence can be. From one perspective, Van Peebles has shown that the individual can overcome imposed class, racial and business limitations if he or she is fast and clever enough. On the other hand, Van Peebles' elevation of the pimp-hustler hero is one source of the gutter spirit of gangster rap. That is devastatingly unfortunate.

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A few days ago, Melvin Van Peebles was inducted into the French Legion of Honor. That is the most distinguished award the French can give. It is reserved for those considered the most accomplished in their professions, especially the arts and scholarship.

That Van Peebles received this honor is another of those remarkable stories that go far beyond almost anything written about black Americans, whether by black Americans themselves or anybody else.

Van Peebles has had a long career composed of part hustle and part content. Street savvy and social concerns have always done battle in him, with the latter winning as often as not. In the process, he has become a wealthy man whose work has always been his own.

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Born in 1932, Van Peebles moved to Europe in the 1950s, when he supported himself in the streets of Paris as a singer. He taught himself French, wrote novels and eventually made a film titled "The Story of a Three Day Pass" about an interracial love affair between a black soldier and a French woman. The film, produced in 1968 with a grant from the French government, was the French entry into the San Francisco Film Festival, where it won the Critics Choice.

In 1968, Van Peebles also recorded "Brer Soul," an album that some say foreshadowed rap, something of a dubious distinction.

But it was with "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song" in 1971 that Van Peebles exploded. That independently financed film mixed the hustler and black revolutionary into one and begat the blaxploitation phenomenon, those second-rate but profitable Hollywood movies that saved the film industry in the '70s.

But Van Peebles was already gone from Hollywood. He wrote a couple of plays for Broadway and began busing black people into midtown, which shook things up quite a bit. Along the way, he adapted "The Sophisticated Gents" from a John Williams novel for a television miniseries. It foreshadowed "Hill Street Blues," "St. Elsewhere," "Homicide," "Law & Order," "The Practice," "ER" and every other show in which we cannot assume anything about a character because of his or her color, religion, class, accent or whatever else. He also became in the '80s the first black trader on Wall Street.

So the Van Peebles contribution has been both varied and exemplary of how complex one person's influence can be. From one perspective, Van Peebles has shown that the individual can overcome imposed class, racial and business limitations if he or she is fast and clever enough. On the other hand, Van Peebles' elevation of the pimp-hustler hero is one source of the gutter spirit of gangster rap. That is devastatingly unfortunate.

Still, when Van Peebles received his honor in a Stanford White mansion in Gramercy Park, the variety of those in attendance - black, white, Asian and Hispanic - was much more in keeping with "The Sophisticated Gents" than the world of rap. There were artists, businesspeople, reporters, film producers and people who either knew him or, if they were young enough and their dreams wild enough, wanted to be another version of him.

Van Peebles' career has been that of the hustler who has also had a sense of epic human complexity. He has understood the marketplace as well as, at his best, he has understood the human heart. Few things are as rare.

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